EVAN B. DONALDSON ADOPTION INSTITUTE

Listening to Parents:
Overcoming Barriers to the Adoption of Children from Foster Care

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Each year, public and private child welfare agencies spend tens of millions of dollars to recruit families to adopt children from foster care. Historically, these recruitment efforts have been based on the goal of obtaining large-scale responses to mass-market efforts such as television programs, newspaper columns featuring waiting children, placemats in restaurants, and two-minute "Wednesday's Child" spots on local news broadcasts.

These campaigns are generally designed to get prospective applicants to make an initial phone call to inquire about adoption. By that measure, these efforts frequently succeed in generating initial interest from prospective adoptive parents: Each year, almost a quarter of a million Americans call social service agencies for information about adopting a child from foster care.

But new research by Adoption Institute Senior Fellow Jeff Katz – in conjunction with colleagues at Harvard University and the Urban Institute – shows that prospective parents who seek information about adopting a child from foster care are often put off by a system they view as too hard to access and more focused on screening out bad candidates than welcoming good ones.

Katz and his colleagues (Julie Wilson, Senior Lecturer at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, and Rob Geen, Senior Research Associate at the Urban Institute) have conducted the largest study ever undertaken of attrition among prospective adoptive parents of children from foster care. They found the vast majority of adults (78%) who call for more information about becoming adoptive parents will not fill out an application or attend an orientation meeting. Just 6% of those who call for information actually complete the adoption homestudy, which is required for all prospective parents. And many of those who do complete a homestudy end up leaving the child welfare agency without ever adopting. While people may decide not to adopt for many reasons, the bottom line is that only a fraction of those recruited to call a child welfare agency actually do adopt.

> "Here at DSS I am scratching at the doors, 'hey, I'm willing to take siblings, I want siblings!' So here I am and I'm not asking you to break the rules, I'm just asking you to lighten up a little bit and you jump instead of me. A little bit, not a lot."
> *- Massachusetts adoption applicant*

Interviews and focus groups with prospective adoptive parents, as well as with agency staff members, document a range of frustrating issues and barriers that keep prospective parents from completing the process. These include differences between the kind of child prospective parents seek (or think they want) and those available; difficulty in accessing the agency or unpleasant initial contacts with it; and ongoing frustration with the agency or aspects of the process. Since this new study shows word of mouth is one of the two primary ways people learn about adopting from foster care (media is the other), such negative experiences may be greatly amplified as frustrated applicants relate their sentiments to their friends, families and acquaintances.

For each of the 126,000 children in foster care who are waiting to be adopted, an alienating experience for a prospective parent can mean the difference between a life spent in the uncertainty of temporary homes and the loving embrace of a permanent family. The cost to these children, and to society as a whole, is incalculable.

According to this research, the most effective way to create permanent, loving homes for waiting children may not be to recruit more families. Rather, it may be to change the system in a way that

welcomes and nurtures adults who are willing, and in some cases avidly trying, to adopt a child from foster care.

Internal problems alienate many prospective parents

> "I had discouraging conversations where I ended up feeling not invited, to sum it up. 'You're not appropriate, you are too old, you are single, you're this, you're that, you want an infant, forget it.' It wasn't really any engagement about whether or not there was a match. That put be back a few months each time."

Researchers for this project, funded by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, conducted the most intensive and sophisticated effort to date to understand the experience of people who adopt children from public child welfare agencies. The project included surveys of over 40 states, analysis of data from the 1997, 1998, and 1999 federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), more than 140 case record reviews, and case studies of adoption practices in three locations – Boston, Miami and San Jose – that involved focus groups and individual interviews with parents at various stages in the process of adoption, as well as with state and private adoption workers.

This study was conceived by Katz, then a Research Fellow at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and now a Senior Fellow at the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, which has assisted in the preparation and dissemination of the research. Katz' work on the project was informed by 10 years of experience as Executive Director of Adoption Rhode Island, a statewide agency that recruits families to adopt children from foster care. The study focused on "general applicants," defined as people who have expressed an interest in adopting a child from the foster care system whom they do not know. The project has, for the first time, documented the extent of attrition as applicants go from their initial inquiry through the adoption process, why large numbers of prospective parents are (or become) discouraged from adopting, and which aspects of the process alienate them.

Among the study's major findings were:

> "We've always wanted children and to be married 12 years and no children.... Mother's Day was so traumatic for me every year.... Then this past Mother's Day was the worst.... I couldn't imagine missing motherhood...

- **The first informational call is key.** People adopt for many reasons. For some callers, their first inquiry about adoption comes at the end of a painful journey that may include illness, infertility, degrading medical procedures, or unbearable loss. When making their first inquiry, applicants noted they wanted to obtain accurate information and to be treated well. Workers also mentioned the need for sensitivity.

- **Agencies often do not handle that first call well**. Parents reported their initial contacts with agencies were the most difficult aspect of the process for two reasons: First, callers often had difficulty reaching the right person, being sent to voice mail or transferred from one person to another. Second, agency personnel answering the first call are often clerical staff with inadequate knowledge of the process, or the focus of the initial call is to screen out "inappropriate" applicants rather than to welcome prospective adoptive parents. Applicants who made a strong initial connection with a worker were best able to tolerate the inevitable frustrations of the process. This connection was often the "make or break" factor for prospective parents.

- **The emphasis is too often on weeding out applicants rather than recruiting them.** Some agencies have procedures that are far more heavily weighted toward screening out inappropriate

applicants rather than recruiting, and supporting, good prospective parents. Two examples: multi-page questionnaires that must be filled out before callers may attend informational meetings; and informational meetings that begin with fingerprinting and focus on technical restrictions about who can adopt, rather than on the rewards and challenges of adopting a child from foster care.

- **Parents are generally satisfied with training and homestudy**. Adopting a child who has been placed in foster care because of abuse or neglect is inherently challenging. The great majority of parents who completed the adoption training process reported being pleased with the preparation they received. Although some said their trainings portrayed the children in an overly negative light, most felt they had a better understanding of, and greater sensitivity toward, the children they would be adopting.

- **The attrition rate rises sharply as prospective families go from initial call to adoption**. The research indicates states annually receive about 240,000 inquiries a year from prospective parents regarding the adoption of a child from foster care. Complications in data collection result in significant numbers of "general applicants" being classified as foster parents who adopt their foster children. However, using the state definition of general applicants, only one in 28 people who call for information about the adoption of a child from foster care eventually adopt such a child. Even under a broader definition of "general applicant," the percentage that complete the process clearly is very small.

Primary Recommendations

Despite the impressive strides made in the wake of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, there are about 80,000 waiting children in foster care who will not be adopted this year. For these boys and girls, the 240,000 Americans who will consider adopting from foster care annually are far too valuable a resource to waste. The following recommendations are intended to increase the retention rate of prospective parents in public child welfare agencies and, thereby, to appreciably increase the number of families who adopt from foster care:

- **Answer the phone, and have qualified staff do it**. This is a critically important initial step to improve waiting children's prospects of getting loving, permanent homes. Agencies therefore should have specialized adoption hotlines, and the phones should be answered by well-trained and friendly individuals who can assure callers of a direct and immediate response.

> "My first experience was my sister calling me about a boy who had been on TV. . . I just wanted to know about this little boy and it just seems like it was a thousand phone calls and a thousand people and this one doesn't know what you are talking about and let me transfer you to somebody else . . ."

- **Address prospective parents' emotional needs during initial contact**. For most prospective adoptive parents, their first contact with a public child welfare agency is a sensitive, highly charged emotional experience. The first person to speak with them therefore should be a professional staff member with a background in counseling and specialized training in adoption.

- **Emphasize recruitment at the start of the process**. During initial contact, informational meetings and orientation, the risk of alienating potentially suitable parents far outweighs that of allowing inappropriate applicants to begin training. During this stage, prospective parents should get clear, written guidelines about qualifications and grounds for being screened out.

- **Separate screening and training functions to the extent possible.** There is an inherent conflict for parents dealing with adoption workers. They are asked, and generally want, to be

open with their feelings as a necessary part of preparation – but the adoption worker also is their judge, and has the power to grant or deny placement of a child. Since applicants stress the importance of having a strong personal connection with a caseworker, agencies should try to separate screening and training, especially at the beginning of the process.

- **Listen to prospective parents.** It is critical that child welfare agencies develop ways of listening to prospective parents throughout the adoption process, then respond to their needs and concerns. Every child welfare system should therefore establish a process for soliciting and incorporating such feedback. This can be accomplished through surveys, focus groups, parent advisory boards, and other means.

Additional recommendations

- **Provide families with a clear, written roadmap of the process**. Parents in this study expressed great confusion about the adoption process – including the roles that various workers play, relationships among different agencies, and the sequential steps they have to take. Providing an explicit explanation could make a major difference in retaining applicants.

- **Provide applicants with a balanced perspective**. While agencies must present a realistic view of the challenges applicants may face, it is vital to remember that adoption is about hope. So agencies should include information about the rewards as well as the challenges, for instance by bringing satisfied adoptive parents into trainings early in the process.

- **Develop a buddy system, outside the agency, to support applicants**. For prospective parents, adoption is an emotionally intense experience. But for an overworked agency, whose focus is the child, the resources may not be available to provide the "hand-holding" applicants require. Established adoptive parents can help provide the necessary support.

Conclusion

In adoption, the paramount goal of public child welfare agencies is to find families for children, and *not* to find children for families. When private agencies charge tens of thousands of dollars to help a family adopt an infant domestically or a child from another country, the prospective adoptive parents can expect (and demand) a level of service for their money that it is difficult for public child welfare agencies to match. Although the public agencies charge no fees, their focus must always be on their primary clients: the abused and neglected children in their care. Even so, these agencies must recognize the need to support adoptive parents and treat them as the precious resource they are: the only positive outcome available for the children who can never return to their original homes. Only by listening to the people who have dealt with the system – adoptive parents and those who never became parents – can we provide the opportunity of a loving family for every child still waiting for a permanent home.